Caught in the TREADS

Unethical Advertising in the ATV Industry
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Tread Lightly!, Inc., was given an earlier draft of this report to review.

Also Available
Caught in the Wake: The Environmental and Human Health Impacts of Personal Watercraft (1999) The Izaak Walton League of America published this ground-breaking report examining the environmental impacts of personal watercraft, the fastest growing segment of the boating industry. Free electronic copies can be found on the IWLA Website, http://www.iwla.org/reports/pwc.html.

On the cover: Loudoun County, Virginia IWLA chapter member Darrell Burkey aboard his ATV. Photo Illustration by Jay Clark, IWLA.
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About the Izaak Walton League of America

Founded in 1922, the Izaak Walton League of America is a national conservation organization whose 50,000 members and supporters protect and enjoy America’s soil, air, woods, waters, and wildlife. Headquartered in Gaithersburg, Md., the League also has a regional office in St. Paul, Minn. For membership information, call (800) IKE-LINE (453-5463) or visit our World Wide Web site at www.iwla.org.
That headline in a 1988 magazine ad infuriated me. Nothing I had seen before in the promotional or advertising realm was as callous, anti-conservation, or outrageously insulting to all who treasure the great outdoors. The ad was part of a Range Rover series that encouraged people to do anything they want with their vehicles, including driving through ponds, streams, and other environmentally sensitive areas. Something had to be done about this unethical message. We alerted the Wall Street Journal to the ad campaign, and the paper ran a story. The piece hit Range Rover upside the head. Not only did the ads suddenly disappear, the company spent substantial money on an “education” initiative in the major public lands states.

Today, given the revelations in this report on all-terrain vehicle (ATV) advertising, it appears that we need to once again “take ‘em to the woodshed.”

Some of the paid messages in ATV advertising today are worse than those old Range Rover ads. Adding insult to injury, many of the scenes promoting joyous destruction carry the Tread Lightly! logo. “TL,” born in the U.S. Forest Service, was designed to reduce damage to wild America — damage primarily caused by unethical and destructive use of off-road vehicles of all types. In 1990, the project was spun off into Tread Lightly!, Inc., a nonprofit organization that includes conservation groups, off-road vehicle clubs and manufacturers, land management agencies — and used to include the Izaak Walton League of America.

In its early days, TL was a fine forum for communication and development of cooperative efforts aimed at ethical recreational use of the nation’s lands and waters. League staffers served on its board of directors until it was obvious that TL had become a sales tool for the industry rather than an effective advocate for ethical outdoor recreation. In recent years, the Tread Lightly! logo has served some manufacturers as little more than useful cover and a stamp of approval for their increasingly disturbing messages, many of which are shown in this report.

The Izaak Walton League has been battling destructive use and abuse of wild America since the organization was founded 80 years ago. This special report looks at another challenge we address in our mission as “Defenders of Soil, Air, Woods, Waters, and Wildlife.”

Jack Lorenz
Charter Board Member, Tread Lightly!
Past Executive Director, Izaak Walton League of America
For 80 years, the Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA) has been a strong voice for sound stewardship of our nation’s natural resources, and the responsible use and enjoyment of those resources. IWLA is not against the use and enjoyment of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), as tools or toys; we are against ATV abuse that destroys the landscape or damages plant communities, fisheries, and wildlife habitat.

I have owned a four-wheel-drive vehicle for the past 20 years and have driven many thousands of miles on legal backcountry roads. I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Many IWLA members are ATV or four-wheel-drive users; all of us are outdoor enthusiasts. We are all opposed to outdoor abusers in every sport. For the past 25 years, our Outdoor Ethics program has challenged outdoor users of all kinds to consider ways to improve our behavior and the impact that our recreational pursuits have on the land, the wildlife, and each other. To suggest ways to do so, we have sponsored two international conferences, published newsletters, spoken to groups, and written several reports like this one.

Almost every sport has its slobs. Since 1922, IWLA has fought unethical hunters and anglers that disgrace these honorable pursuits for us all. Similarly, there are dangerous and unethical skiers and mountain bikers. Mountain climbers promote clean climbing, campers promote minimal impact, anglers practice catch-and-release, and rafters must get permits for most trips. All forms of recreation now must practice responsible use, and ATVs are no exception.

Unfortunately, a segment of ATV users believe it is their God-given right to go anywhere and do anything they want on public lands without considering the impact of their acts. They are wrong. There are more than 500,000 miles of legal backcountry roads and trails on public land — a lifetime’s worth — for their use and enjoyment. There are special areas set aside as designated off-road areas, and there probably should be more. There are private lands available for ATV use where few, if any, restrictions apply.

This report provides examples of how much the ATV industry encourages landscape abuse in its advertising while claiming to adhere to the principles of Tread Lightly! — an organization that says it is in business to stop the abuse. The Tread Lightly! logo has become meaningless; it appears on ads that blatantly disregard the organization’s own principles. Across the nation, participation in Tread Lightly! is used as a cover-up for ATV abuse. It has become a green-scam that no responsible outdoor user should believe.

The abuse and destruction of our public lands by some ATV users must cease. An end to the promotion of abuse by the manufacturers of all-terrain vehicles would be a good start.

Paul W. Hansen
Executive Director, Izaak Walton League of America
The off-road vehicle (ORV) industry is a multibillion-dollar establishment that produces motorized vehicles designed for or capable of cross-country travel over most types of terrain. These vehicles include off-highway and dual-purpose motorcycles, sport utility vehicles, snowmobiles, and all-terrain vehicles.

One segment of the ORV industry that has experienced a marked increase in popularity has been ATVs. Since 1990, ATV sales have increased fourfold, with approximately 600,000 units sold in 2000. This has resulted in close to 4.5 million ATVs in use today. Considering 95 percent of recent ATV purchasers say they ride the vehicles for recreational purposes, it is clear that off-road travel via ATV is one of the fastest-growing forms of outdoor recreation.

**With Use Comes Risk**

As with any manufactured product, there are inherent risks associated with improper use of a particular item. The ATV industry has long been aware of the safety issues associated with riding ATVs, which typically outweigh their operators by a 3:1 ratio, increasing personal risk with their improper use. The industry has done a fine job of addressing these risks by showing advertisements in which riders are wearing appropriate safety gear. But it has not done a good job addressing the environmental damage caused by improper ATV use.

ATVs can cause considerable damage to the environment when operated in inappropriate conditions (rainy, wet weather) or in sensitive areas (i.e. desert, coastal, riparian...
areas). This is due to the vehicle’s heavy weight and the grinding action of studded tires on soft terrain. The environmental impacts are further compounded by repetitive use. Therefore, one stray set of illegal or inappropriate ATV tracks may cause others to follow and result in substantial ecological damage.

Considering the number of ATVs in use today and the environmental consequences associated with improper use, it is imperative that the ATV industry promotes responsible use of their products through their advertising.

**Promoting Responsible Use**

Promoting responsible ATV use is not a new idea. In 1986, a study conducted by the Off-Road Vehicle Travel Management Review made the following recommendation:

“Work with ORV manufacturers and user groups to encourage them to continue their efforts to ... turn around the advertising that portrays irresponsible use of land by ORVs”

The review team recognized the fact that consumers are impressionable; therefore, advertisements displaying irresponsible use could encourage irresponsible behavior by the user.

The ATV industry heeded this advice and began producing environmentally friendly ads. This trend toward cleaning up irresponsible off-road advertising continued through the late 1980s and hit an all-time high with the creation of Tread Lightly!, Inc., in 1990.
Tread Lightly!, Inc., is a not-for-profit organization that claims its charitable purpose is to protect public and private lands through education. Emphasis is placed on responsible use of off-road vehicles, other forms of backcountry travel, and on low-impact principles applicable to all outdoor recreational activities.5

According to Tread Lightly!, responsible outdoor advertising is:

“...powerful, yet not destructive.” 6

This type of message demonstrates to consumers that a corporation cares about important environmental issues; therefore, the Tread Lightly! organization urges manufacturers to take responsibility in their advertising.

Individuals, corporations, associations, and government agencies promote the Tread Lightly! organization through the adoption of its principles. Corporate members are listed on this page. (A list of all members can be found on the organization’s Web site, www.treadlightly.org.) They have developed an Official Sponsor logo and encourage supporting members to display the notation of Official Sponsorship of Tread Lightly! in advertising and promotional materials.7

Although it is not required to be a sponsoring member of Tread Lightly! in order to display the Tread Lightly! trademark, anyone displaying the mark must abide by the Tread Lightly! guidelines through their advertising and their recreating. Some members choose not to display the logo on all ads, but by being members it is assumed that they are subscribing to Tread Lightly!’s mission and principles and are using this relationship to paint themselves as environmentally responsible.
In order for advertisers and the media to present a positive impression of outdoor recreation, Tread Lightly! has established the Tread Lightly! Advertising Guidelines, which serve as a reference for its members when creating advertising that is “powerful, yet not destructive.” These guidelines are used as the basis for determining environmentally responsible off-road advertisements and promotions. Tread Lightly! has also created a logo that advertisers and promoters can use when abiding by these guidelines:

**Guideline 1: Wilderness and Wildlands**

In 1964, Congress passed the Wilderness Act. Designated wilderness areas are available for fishing, hunting, hiking, etc. However, because of this act, by law a number of activities, including the use of motorized and mechanized vehicles, are prohibited. So, in the true sense, the use of the word “wilderness” in advertising and editorials incorrectly implies consent and allowable use of vehicles inside these areas. People sometimes refer to remote backcountry areas as wilderness because they are so far removed from civilization. Wildlands, backcountry, and the great outdoors are more correct terms for describing these areas. Using these terms will help avoid sending the wrong message regarding vehicle use in wilderness areas.

**Guideline 2: Off-Road vs. Off-Highway**

Off-highway refers to the use of existing unpaved roads and trails. The term “off-road” has become synonymous with “go anywhere.” Staying on the road or trail is one of the most important Tread Lightly! principles. Whenever possible, avoid the term “off-road” in advertising, editorial, and educational materials. The indirect message directly affects user attitudes and actions. It is understood however, there are some circumstances where the use of the commercial phrase “off-road” may be necessary.

**Guideline 3: Staying On Designated Roads and Trails**

The fun of owning an OHV is enjoying its unique features and capabilities. The challenge and excitement of OHV operation can be found across more than 500,000 miles of backcountry roads and trails on federally managed lands that are open to recreational users. Straying from existing unpaved roads and trails destroys plant and animal life and increases soil erosion. Resulting scars are unsightly and difficult and sometimes impossible to repair. Do not show backroads where inappropriate use and subsequent scarring and erosion have already occurred.

Whenever possible, show an obvious road or trail to a scenic destination. Rock and gravel surfaces provide the best natural surface if the actual roadway is not visible. Never show vehicles blazing a new trail.

Federal land management agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service can direct users to many interesting backcountry roads and trails. Staying on these roads and trails will help protect natural resources and wildlife and allow public lands to remain open for use.
Guideline 4: Taking It Easy

When portraying vehicles in action, fun and excitement need not be excluded in advertising, but be aware of the implied message associated with excessive speed. Excessive speed may cause damage to the vehicle, occupants, and or road surface where visibility or road-surface conditions are hazardous. The implied message should be consistent with good judgement and safety.

Guideline 5: Water — A Sensitive Issue

All bodies of water contain extremely delicate ecosystems. Vehicle action shots near water should use bridges or designated fording points to cross at a 90-degree angle to the stream, avoiding excessive speed and wheel spinning. Especially sensitive areas such as wetlands, spawning beds, riparian areas, and river banks should be avoided. Scenes of vehicles and or campsites should depict a reasonable distance from the waters edge, whether at a lake or stream setting. This will motivate others by showing that you care — and they should too. Sell the example as well as the product.

Guideline 6: Avoiding Wet Backcountry Roads and Trails

Mud isn’t macho. Heavy vehicles can damage wet or soft backcountry roads and trails by creating huge ruts, making them impassable and encouraging others to bypass the obstruction, thus creating new roads and trails. Avoid scenes depicting these conditions. Advertise the smart way — demonstrate restraint.

Guideline 7: Silence Is Golden

Peace and quiet is one of the benefits of visiting the backcountry. Noise offends other users of the road or trail system. More importantly, noise can frighten wildlife and alter their normal behavior patterns. Depict vehicle actions that demonstrate wildlife conservation. Demonstrate concern for the inhabitants and the visitors alike. Protect wildlife by turning down the decibels.

Guideline 8: Leave No Trace

Impacts can be minimized by practicing “Leave No Trace” principles so those who follow will be able to enjoy the same outdoor experience you have encountered. Anything carried in should be carried out! Leave the area better than you found it! If you think no one’s been there, those who came before you succeeded! You can, too!

* These guidelines are taken directly from the Tread Lightly! Web site, www.treadlightly.org.
It has become clear that the ATV industry not only has largely ceased to promote responsible use of their products, it has begun to encourage use that is both potentially hazardous to the rider and detrimental to the environment.

In this report, the Izaak Walton League of America has compiled many ATV advertisements — all from manufacturers that are corporate members of Tread Lightly! — that disregard Tread Lightly!'s own guidelines for ethical advertising. Some of the manufacturers even use the Tread Lightly! logo on ads that exhibit some of the most unethical behavior.

For example:

**Guideline #1: Wilderness and Wildlands**

The Tread Lightly! guideline states:

“... the use of the word ‘wilderness’ in advertising and editorials incorrectly implies consent and allowable use of vehicles inside these areas. Wildlands, backcountry, and the great outdoors are more correct terms for describing these areas. Using these terms will help avoid sending the wrong message regarding vehicle use in wilderness areas.”

This ATV ad from Bombardier states:

*would leave most other ATVs trembling. Because when you’re out in the back of beyond, you need a machine that’s as wild as the wilderness it’s made for. And one that’ll give you all the comfort you need for the long haul.*

—Jack Placchi, Colorado State Parks OHV Program Manager
In violation of ...

Guideline #2: Off-Road vs. Off-Highway

The Tread Lightly! guideline states:

“Whenever possible, avoid the term “off-road” in advertising, editorial, and educational materials.”

The above Polaris ATV ad (extracted below) states:

Polaris

TIME TO RECALIBRATE THE RICHTER SCALE.

Practical Polaris could build an ATV of this magnitude introducing the all-new Sportsman 700 Twin. Featuring the biggest powerplant ever housed into an ATV — a powerful, open-bore, liquid-cooled Polaris 700 Twin engine — with enough reserve power to tackle jobs of seismic proportion. Plus the world’s best-selling automatic transmission for off-road reliability. Independent rear suspension is smooth and the roughest terrain is earth. And over 100 new engineering advances designed to give you everything you want in an ATV — the Sportsman 700 Twin. For hunting, farming, ranching, trail riding, for everything off-road, it’s the most powerful, smoothest-riding 4x4 you can buy.
In violation of ...

Guideline #3: Staying on Designated Roads and Trails

The Tread Lightly! guideline states:
“Never show vehicles blazing a new trail.”

The above Polaris ATV ad depicts the vehicle in an area where there appears to be no road or designated trail.
Guideline #4: Taking it Easy

The Tread Lightly! guideline states:

“... be aware of the implied message associated with excessive speed. The implied message should be consistent with good judgement and safety.”

In the Yamaha ad below, the blurred wheels and driver leaning into the turn implies speed.
Special consideration is given to Guideline #5 given the fact that ATV operation within streambeds is one of the most environmentally damaging practices.

The logo displayed in this ad is actually the Tread Lightly! Advertising Leadership Award.

**In violation of ...**

**Guideline #5: Water — A Sensitive Issue**

The Tread Lightly! guideline states:

“Especially sensitive areas such as wetlands, spawning beds, riparian areas, and river banks should be avoided. Scenes of vehicles and/or campsites should depict a reasonable distance from the waters edge, whether at a lake or stream setting.”

The Kawasaki ATV ad above shows a rider operating the vehicle inside a streambed.
Guideline #5: Water — A Sensitive Issue

The Tread Lightly! guideline states that vehicles should avoid:

“excessive speed and wheel spinning.”

The Polaris ad below shows wheel spinning on wet soil.
Guideline #6: Avoiding Wet Backcountry Roads and Trails

The Tread Lightly! guideline states:

“Mud isn’t macho. Avoid scenes depicting these conditions.”

These Arctic Cat (below) and Yamaha (right) ads clearly use mud as the focal point of the promotion.
THE ROAD TO HEAVEN IS PAVED IN MUD.

All New, Push Button Inclined 4x4
- Large Diameter Front Disc Brakes
- Powered by 350cc Engine
- No Matter What Nature Throws You, We've Got You Covered.

YAMAHA

Yamaha Motor Corp.
Guideline #7: Silence is Golden

The Tread Lightly! guideline states:

“... noise can frighten wildlife and alter their normal behavior patterns. Depict vehicle actions that demonstrate wildlife conservation. Demonstrate concern for the inhabitants and the visitors alike.”

This Arctic Cat ad depicts a rider having just run over a ruffed grouse with the vehicle.

The caption reads:
Guideline #8: Leave No Trace

The Tread Lightly! guideline states:

“Impacts can be minimized by practicing Leave No Trace principles so those who follow will be able to enjoy the same outdoor experience you have encountered. Leave the area better than you found it!”

As with many ads that depict ATVs tearing up soil and creating mud, the Polaris ad below does not illustrate a “Leave No Trace” message.
The ATV industry blatantly breaks every rule of responsible environmental advertising set forth by Tread Lightly! Instead of promoting responsible use of their products, the industry depicts ATVs as machines that are to be used solely for the rider’s enjoyment, with little or no regard for the impacts on fish and wildlife habitat and plant communities.

The Tread Lightly! organization has turned a blind eye to these practices. The organization has become a smoke screen for the industry and has even begun promoting events that would ordinarily give the whole ORV industry a black eye.

A report from one off-roading event promoted on the Tread Lightly! Web site reads:

“... The scenery was pure splendor. It started to rain harder and patchy snow covered the ground. The trail was slushy, and we were making it muddy as we traveled...”

Is It Really That Bad?

Some people might argue this whole issue is just another attack from the “environmentalists” and that reality isn’t quite as bad as it appears. Unfortunately, it is.

65 percent of Bureau of Land Management rangers believe off-road vehicles are having a negative impact on the public lands they patrol.

This negative impact comes at a heavy price. A recent study conducted on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest found that irresponsible ATV use inflicted a substantial amount of damage on the forest ecosystem. U.S. Forest Service officials estimate that the forest’s 865,000 acres contain more than 550 miles of illegal trails. One of the researchers found illegal ATV use on 67 percent of the 59 routes he surveyed, including designated wilderness areas where motorized vehicle use is illegal.
One of the recommendations of the study was to decide whether to end the use of ATVs within the national forest or to repair the damage. Given the Forest Service’s limited resources, closure of these areas to both the responsible and irresponsible ATV users might soon be the only option.

The ATV industry must realize the ramifications of irresponsible use and not write it off as only a “small percentage” of overall users. Considering there are 4.5 million ATVs in use today, each one averaging at least 350 miles per year (the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates are about 20 times as great)\(^{11}\), the repercussions from a “small percentage” equals a substantial amount of damage. This includes:

- Damage to soils through compaction and displacement.\(^{12,13,14}\)
- Degradation of water resources through erosion and sedimentation.\(^{15}\)
- Wildlife impacts through destruction of habitat, direct harassment of animals, and behavioral modifications associated with ORV use.\(^{16,17,18,19,20}\)
- Air pollution through the emission of smog-forming pollutants.\(^{21,22}\)
- The spread of invasive plant species that are caught in vehicle treads.\(^{23}\)
- Aesthetic loss due to scarring of landscape.
- Escalation of user conflicts due to irresponsible behavior.

This is why it’s so important for the ATV industry to step up to the plate and honestly and aggressively promote responsible ATV use.

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**Below: Operator behavior reflects industry advertising as users drive their vehicle through the Upper Missouri River, a National Wild & Scenic River.**
Many manufacturers run advertisements that follow Tread Lightly!’s guidelines. Unfortunately, some of these same companies run unethical ads, too — sometimes in the same magazine as ethical ads!
A large body of evidence indicates that all-terrain vehicles can inflict a tremendous amount of damage to the environment when used improperly. Therefore, manufacturers of these machines must take certain precautions to prevent their misuse. This includes, but is not limited to, promoting responsible use of the product through advertising and producing user-educational materials.

Unfortunately, current ATV advertising campaigns practice the opposite. They promote improper use of their product, which has resulted in a substantial amount of damage to our public lands and has tarnished the image of responsible, law-abiding ATV users.

In addition to the industry’s unethical tactics, the Tread Lightly! organization has not held to its mission of promoting responsible advertising. Their seemingly soft approach to a conservation ethic and responsible use does nothing to discourage consumer beliefs that ATVs can go anywhere, anytime.

Unfortunately, the ATV industry and Tread Lightly! are not the only guilty parties. As more vehicles are designed to go off-road, the entire ORV industry must acknowledge the potential for environmental damage caused by irresponsible use and take a lead role in promoting ethical behavior. This includes the motorcycle, snowmobile, sport utility vehicle, and personal watercraft industries.

Last but not least, a fair amount of responsibility must fall on the media that runs ads and articles about ORVs. Vehicles that have the capability to go anywhere, anytime should not be encouraged to do so under certain conditions. ORV promotion must stop endorsing the concept of conquering nature and start preaching coexistence if we are to ensure outdoor America’s future.

*Enjoy safe, responsible riding.*

*The Izaak Walton League of America*
Endnotes

5. Tread Lightly! Tread Lightly!®, Inc. 298 24th Street, Suite 325, Ogden, Utah 84401. www.treadlightly.org